

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony of James Lyons

STATEMENT OF
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Impact and Status of the Northern Spotted Owl on National Forests

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MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee to discuss the impact and status of the northern spotted owl on National Forests. Today I am accompanied by Robert Williams, Regional Forester for the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Region, and Dr. Martin Raphael, scientist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station.

I am pleased to appear with representatives of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service today. Many of the concerns your committee raised deal with the listing, status as a threatened species, and recovery of the northern spotted owl. These issues, with their basis in the Endangered Species Act, are the special responsibilities of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

That said, I hasten to add that the Forest Service works very closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service in managing the National Forests. This is especially so in the Pacific Northwest where advice by the Fish and Wildlife Service, in concert with several others, assists us in managing the National Forests and Bureau of Land Management forests under the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan. In addition, we are working closely with them to monitor both the compliance with, and the effectiveness of, the Northwest Forest Plan. And, through our Research arm, our several agencies are jointly studying the population, habitat, and trends of the northern spotted owl.

How is the owl doing? We refer to the testimony here of our colleagues in the Fish and Wildlife Service: It's too soon to tell. The spotted owl is a long-lived species in a forest environment that changes slowly. Its populations may be affected by unique events and conditions from one year to the next that are unrelated to forest management. Thus the data from the first years of the Northwest Forest Plan are not now sufficient to give us confidence in any trend. We, along with many, are looking forward to the results of the analysis next year that will give us our first scientifically credible look at recent trends.

The Northwest Forest Plan is not just a plan for the spotted owl. We tried writing plans just for the spotted owl, and they didn't work. In 1988 and again in 1992 the Forest Service issued guidelines for the management of habitat specifically for the spotted owl. Both times federal courts ruled that our efforts were not adequate and enjoined timber sales in spotted owl habitat. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) encountered (procedurally different but) similar difficulty in its attempt to harvest timber on the lands it manages in Oregon.

New timber sale offerings on federal forests in northern spotted owl country came to a virtual halt at the turn of the decade. Timber workers and timber dependent communities, already impacted by automation, alternate markets, and industry reorganization, reeled. Congressional efforts, such as Section 318 of the 1990 Appropriations Bill, granted some short term relief. In spite of Section 318 and other efforts "gridlock" had arrived in the forests and rural communities across western Washington, western Oregon, and northwestern California.

On April 2, 1993, President Clinton convened the Forest Conference in Portland, Oregon to address the human and ecological needs served by federal forests of the Pacific Northwest and northern California. Based on the Forest Conference, the President asked his Administration and federal professionals to create a science-based forest management plan built on five goals: 1) adhere to the Nation's laws, 2) protect and enhance the environment, 3) provide a sustainable timber economy, 4) support the region's people and communities during economic transition, and 5) ensure that federal agencies work together. An interagency interdisciplinary team of expert scientists assessed proposals for management of federal forests in the range of the northern spotted owl. The team produced a report which was used as the basis to develop alternatives. A Record of Decision was issued April 1994, which amended the planning documents of 19 National Forests and 7 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Districts. The Record of Decision sets standards and guidelines, including land allocations for management of federal lands within the range of the northern spotted owl.

The Northwest Forest Plan is not just a plan for ensuring the viability of the northern spotted owl. It provides significant protections for streams, riparian areas, water quality, and fish. It provides a system of old-growth and late-successional reserves with a multitude of benefits to species that depend on old forests. And, through the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative, the Plan also was a foundation of help to communities to cope with, and benefit from, economic transition.

Two months after the Plan's release, the court injunctions were lifted, clearing the way for the agencies to offer new timber sales and other management actions for the first time in three years. Since then, federal agencies' decisions have continued to prevail in subsequent legal challenges, allowing the Northwest Forest Plan to move forward.

The Plan applies only to federal lands managed by the Forest Service and the BLM in the range of the northern spotted owl. The Plan does not apply to state, private, or tribal lands. While not issued as the final owl recovery plan required by the Endangered Species Act, the Plan does provide comprehensive management direction for the federal lands that will enhance recovery efforts for the owl. It will also enhance the recovery efforts for other listed old-growth dependent species (such as the marbled murrelet), and for listed fish species by managing for healthy, sustainable forest and riparian ecosystems in the Northwest.

What does it cost to manage for the northern spotted owl? This is an important question. We do not believe

it possible to isolate those aspects of the Northwest Forest Plan which preceded it) which can be attributed to spotted owl management alone. Because the benefits which accrue to owl habitat and populations also accrue to many other species and forest conditions, one can not say what it costs to manage for the owl. Many of our management actions which benefit the owl are done for reasons independent of the owl -- to comply with laws, to ensure a diversity of habitats, or to ensure the sustainability of our forests for multiple use.

The Committee asked us to provide information on costs incurred by local governments and/or private entities to comply with federal requirements related to the northern spotted owl. The Northwest Forest Plan imposes no requirements on local government or private entities which directly cause them to pay any costs. (The Fish and Wildlife Service has authority for programs for species recovery on non-federal lands.)

The Committee also posed the important question of the federal, state, and local revenues foregone due to owl management requirements. This is another unanswerable question, and unanswerable for two reasons. First, the Northwest Forest Plan requires a number of management actions which benefit a number of species and environmental conditions--one can not say what portion is attributable to spotted owls. Secondly, the Northwest Plan enabled an increase in timber harvest activity from the period of "gridlock" preceding it. We all recognize that current timber sale levels are far below those of the mid- and late-1980s--but they are above those of the early- 1990s. In this context, the Forest Plan has enabled revenues to be gathered which would have been foregone without the Northwest Forest Plan.

Research on the spotted owl and monitoring have improved our understanding through studies on population trends (demographics) and habitat conditions. Trends in spotted owl populations are not easily attributed to any single factor but are a complex interaction between changes in habitat, climate, food sources, and abundance of competing species. Hypotheses regarding any of these various factors can only be tested with reliable, long-term demographic data.

In 1994, Federal District Judge Dwyer upheld the Northwest Forest Plan approach but explicitly emphasized that it would hold up to legal scrutiny only if the Forest Service and BLM monitored the effects of the plan on key wildlife species. As a result, the Forest Service and BLM have maintained and supported a comprehensive monitoring plan for the spotted owl. Continuation of spotted owl research (in particular, modeling the relationship between habitat and populations) and monitoring is a critical component in understanding the complexities of ecosystems while we adapt management strategies to achieve desired forest management objectives.

In 1997, an interagency Effectiveness Monitoring plan was developed. This monitoring plan emphasizes the need for continuing monitoring efforts underway. Owl demography studies are summarized annually for each of the individual study areas, but a combined range-wide analysis of all the data from the different study areas (a "meta-analysis") is only done every few years. The last such analysis was conducted in 1993. The next interagency scientific analysis is scheduled for December 1998.

Demographic monitoring studies have proved invaluable for determining trends of owl populations; habitat trends alone do not yet provide this information. The northern spotted owl populations appear to be declining in some areas, but may be stable in others. Much remains to be learned about why owls occupy specific sites, and how restoration and management can help return owls to sites or maintain their occupancy. Several studies have helped develop new forestry methods -- selective thinning to speed the growth of tree girth, creation of cavity trees, etc. -- that might speed restoring late-successional forests as spotted owl habitat.

We have provided the Committee with a list of scientific publications on the spotted owl from 1994 to the present. This list of publications includes research done in cooperation with the Forest Service, other government agencies, universities, and cooperating research organizations.

The Forest Service allocates funds within the structure outlined by the Congress's appropriations committees. Our funding structure does not include an "owl management" category. Because of the ecosystem management approach of the Northwest Forest Plan, we organize our work according to key components of ecosystem management, such as watershed analysis and riparian restoration. As such, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive set of costs related to a single species, such as the northern spotted owl.

Forest management for the multiple purposes prescribed in the Northwest Forest Plan requires careful thought before acting. The Plan calls for several types of analysis which are closer to the ground than the large scale Plan. Between 1995 and 1997, we completed 283 watershed analyses representing 55% of Northwest Forest Plan watersheds. All initial analyses will be complete in three years. These analyses set the stage for a variety of projects including watershed restoration,

timber sales, recreation projects, and management of roads and trails. Watershed restoration activities include repairing or obliterating roads, stabilizing upland areas and restoring stream channels and banks. Watershed analyses currently cost between \$90,000 and \$100,000 each.

Late Successional Reserves total nearly 7.5 million acres within the Northwest Forest Plan area; Reserves help provide a distribution, quantity, and quality of old-growth forest habitat sufficient to avoid the extinction of associated flora and fauna such as the northern spotted owl. Assessments for 75% of the acres of Late Successional Reserves will be finished by the summer of 1998. There are ten Adaptive Management Areas identified in the Northwest Forest Plan; they have over 300 research and monitoring projects underway. Eight of the Adaptive Management Areas have completed plans.

This completes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have or to provide you with any available information on this topic.

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